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Taking a Bite Outta Lobster Declines: Rhode Island's V-Notch Conservation Program

by Capt. Warren "Ted" E. Colburn

In a raging winter storm in 1996, the oil barge *North Cape* ran aground on Moonstone Beach in Rhode Island, spilling about 800,000 gallons of home heating oil into Block Island Sound and onto the shore. It is estimated that 9 million American lobsters, from juveniles to adults, were killed in the spill, along with several thousand birds, and millions of clams, fish and other marine invertebrates. The responsible party, along with state and federal governments, reached a settlement which requires the restoration of lobsters and other wildlife killed by the oil spill.

The Ocean Technology Foundation (OTF) is conducting the lobster restoration effort, which involves restocking 1.24 million adult female lobsters. An estimated 23 billion eggs from these females should yield in excess of nine million lobsters, replacing those that perished in the spill.

Local lobstermen are playing an important role in the restoration project. OTF observers in the program accompany lobstermen out to sea, where they check to see if lobsters pulled up in the traps meet the criteria for the restocking program.

If a lobster is female, has a hard, clean shell, and is of legal size, a "v-notch" is made in her right middle tail segment, which marks her as a participant in the restoration program, and makes her illegal to keep if she is again caught in a trap. The lobstermen receive credit for each lobster that is notched and returned to the sea.

The ability of OTF and the National Marine Fisheries Service scientists to review data on a daily basis has been a critical element in managing the program. A restocking area may be temporarily closed to notching when consistent catch rates yield three previously notched lobsters for every one legal, harvestable lobster. An important indicator that the program is succeeding is that many of the notched lobsters (40-45%) are producing eggs, as observed when recaptured females are returned to the sea. A portion of these eggs will become legal-sized lobsters in about five years.



A "v-notch" is clipped into a female lobster's tail as a conservation measure. The lobster will be released to the sea, to allow her to reproduce.

A similar program for Connecticut has been proposed and is being considered by the legislature.

Captain Warren "Ted" E. Colburn, PE, is chairman of the Ocean Technology Foundation based at the UConn Avery Point campus in Groton, Connecticut. Ted has been actively involved in implementing the lobster v-notch conservation program in Rhode Island since its inception.

Right: The *North Cape* oil spill in January, 1996, was the worst in Rhode Island's history.

